Fisheries Overview

By Terry Steinwand

Taking all of North Dakota into account, there was some pretty good fishing in 2004. That said, not all anglers are going to be in agreement with this proclamation.

We would all like to see it better, something we constantly strive to achieve, but recognize there are some constraints in consistently making fish populations greater and fishing better. Plus, there's always the challenge of finding time to go fishing, finding the right lake or location, and then enticing the fish to bite.

There were some high and low points in 2004. One of the highs was the continuation of the high number of lakes State Game and Fish Department fisheries personnel were able to actively manage. A couple years ago that number was nearly 350 lakes, and we were managing all of them in one form or another. In 2004, the number dropped to about 290 waters because of drought in certain parts of the state. Then again, it wasn't that many years ago when we were managing only half that number.

One of the low points going into the open-water season in 2004 dealt with the worst winterkill in more than 20 years. One total fish kill, 15 significant fish kills, and 29 partial fish kills were documented. Overall, these numbers seems high, but were buffered since the number of lakes we manage is still quite high. But if one of those winterkill waters was one of your favorite fishing holes, it certainly hurt. Some of the fish kills translated into relatively poor open-water and ice-fishing in 2004. In many of those areas we were still able to sustain a fishery, fish were reestablished and appear to have made it through another North Dakota winter, which should mean good things for future fishing.

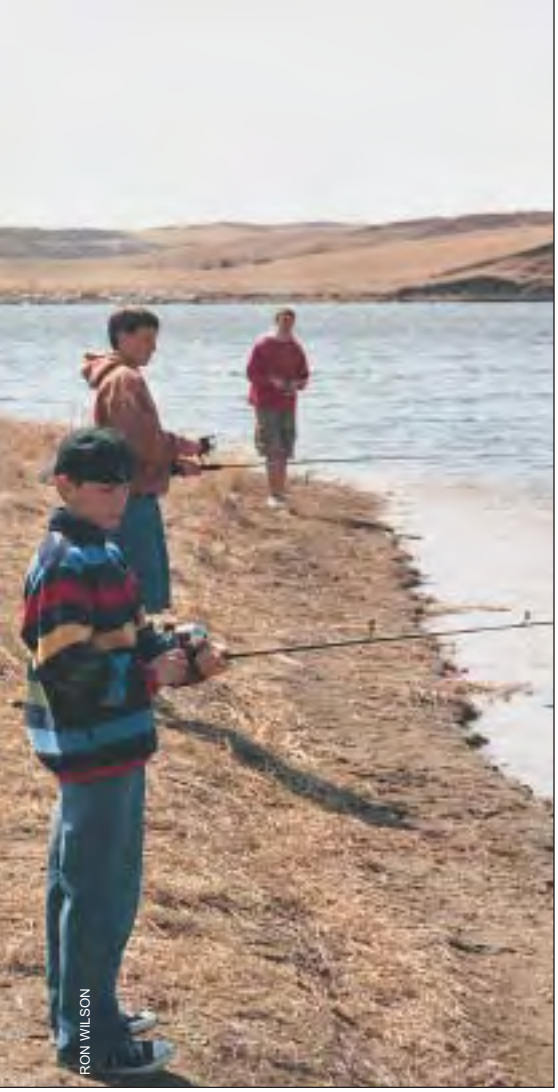
Multiple Factors

In 2004, I mentioned in *North Dakota OUTDOORS* that good fish populations don't always translate into good fishing. In the past, there were good perch populations in select lakes that simply didn't cooperate during freeze up. This lack of cooperation likely has multiple reasons – food source is too high, fish are stressed because of poor environmental conditions, and so on. I wish I could say there were numerous lakes where perch populations were abundant in 2004 (and the early part of 2005), but we knew that perch populations were down overall across the state, with some exceptions. This past winter's ice-fishing certainly confirmed that.

Poor fishing in some waters can be attributed to winterkill. We basically lost these lakes for a year or two until the fish can reestablish and grow to a size acceptable to anglers. Secondly, the relatively cool summer played a role as production of food and growth were sometimes not adequate to recruit fish to the angler's creel. Thirdly, since perch depend on flooded terrestrial vegetation to spawn – something they found little

There is still plenty of good northern pike fishing to be had in waters of all sizes in the state.

CHRIS GRONDAHL


RON WILSON

A boat is not necessary to fish many of North Dakota's waters.

In 2004, Game and Fish Department fisheries biologists used chemicals to renovate Camels Hump Dam in Golden Valley County to rid the fishery of unwanted carp.

of because of lower water levels and little runoff – reproduction and recruitment were down the past couple of years.

Another reason is that many of the smaller lakes that were either nonexistent 10 years ago, or were simply sloughs, have lost the productivity found in the early stages of their existence. When a new area is flooded, much of the productivity goes into food production, translating most times into good fish growth and ultimately good fishing. As the lake ages, however, it tends to stabilize. While it can still produce some good fishing, the aging water doesn't provide the quality fishing it did in its early stages, as some of the productivity that had gone into fish flesh is now tied up in other organic material.

Rebound

While we don't relish the occurrence of another drought, we can look forward to the future when some of these fisheries are once again flooded, and productivity returns for a time, with good fishing to follow. This rationale certainly doesn't explain all the reasons why fishing was slow last winter, especially for perch. I received many phone calls during the ice-fishing season from anglers using underwater cameras to observe fish "nosing the bait" and swimming away. In some areas we know there was abundant food and fish likely didn't have the urge to feed. In others waters, it's only a guess why fish didn't bite.

The 2004 open-water season opened with some big challenges. Low water levels on Lake Sakakawea and Lake Oahe were immediate concerns. While much "hand wringing" occurred over ensuring adequate access, the cooperation and collaboration of many resulted in 22 boating access sites available on Lake Sakakawea. Unfortunately, there wasn't much that could be done on Oahe, considering we basically didn't have any Oahe left in North Dakota. The Missouri River channel was all that remained. Many sites were studied for potential access, but a number of factors – poor slope, no access to the site and cost – prevented their development.

Open-water fishing in 2004 across the state was fair to good for most lakes. Again, I know I'd get some disagreement, but when fishing success for the last decade or more is reviewed, it was pretty good in comparison. Some lakes didn't produce like they had in the past for reasons mentioned earlier, others met expectations, while still others provided better fishing than expected.

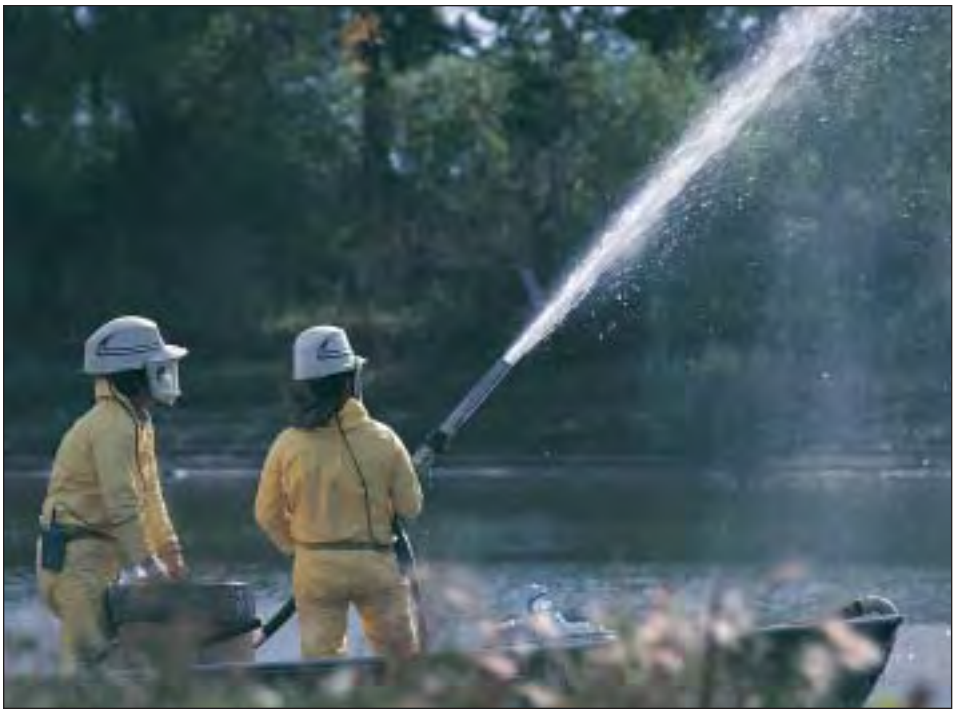
Big Lakes

Sakakawea and Devils Lake are always prime destinations for more than half the state's licensed anglers. While use slightly declined on Sakakawea in 2004, likely because of the "scare" of inadequate access, the harvest was similar to 2001. Devils Lake, on the other hand, had harvest and use similar to past years. Fishing on most smaller lakes was typical – good early in the open-water season, with use dropping off dramatically about mid-June largely because fish were inaccessible because of excessive shoreline weed growth.

One of the most important factors during summer 2004 was the relatively cool temperatures. It extended the bite on some smaller lakes and saved some coldwater habitat on Lake Sakakawea.

Now to the million dollar question: What can we expect for 2005? This is always a dangerous question to answer since it depends on a myriad of factors. On top of everyone's list is the water level of the Missouri River System, Lake Sakakawea in particular. The big lake is about 8 feet lower than at this time in 2004, and help doesn't appear to be on the way. The snow pack in the mountains of Montana, the primary source of water for Sakakawea, doesn't look to be the best at this time.

Department personnel are once again working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, State Parks and Recreation Department and others in an effort to provide adequate boating access on Sakakawea. The goal is to have 20 usable boating access sites by Memorial Day.


RON WILSON

As the result of many phone calls – and cooperation primarily from the corps – there will be some vehicular shore access on Sakakawea this spring. I hesitate to say how much and where, but we know there will be more than last year.

Low water isn't just threatening boating access or making shore access more difficult, it's also threatening the reservoir's coldwater habitat, which is critical to the survival of rainbow smelt, a primary food of walleye, salmon and other game fish. In 2004, coldwater habitat got a break because of cooler than typical summer temperatures, but we can't expect the same situation two years in a row. We're working with other state and federal agencies to come up with options to preserve as much coldwater habitat as possible.

Predators Eating Prey

While challenges are many, the low water situation should provide some good fishing this summer. Don't be surprised if the fish look a little skinnier than typical since rainbow smelt have shown some declines the last couple of years. Although a smelt decline leads to skinnier fish, it could also mean hungrier fish, and the bite should be on.

One of the most important factors during summer 2004 was the relatively cool temperatures. It extended the bite on some smaller lakes and saved some coldwater habitat on Lake Sakakawea.

Devils Lake should continue to provide some very good fishing once again. While the perch population is down a bit, walleye and pike continue to flourish. The walleye population is one of the best on record and is showing no signs of slowing down, while pike are somewhat on the same track. This is a good sign, but also one of the reasons perch numbers are down. That many predators in a system make it difficult for prey to rebound.

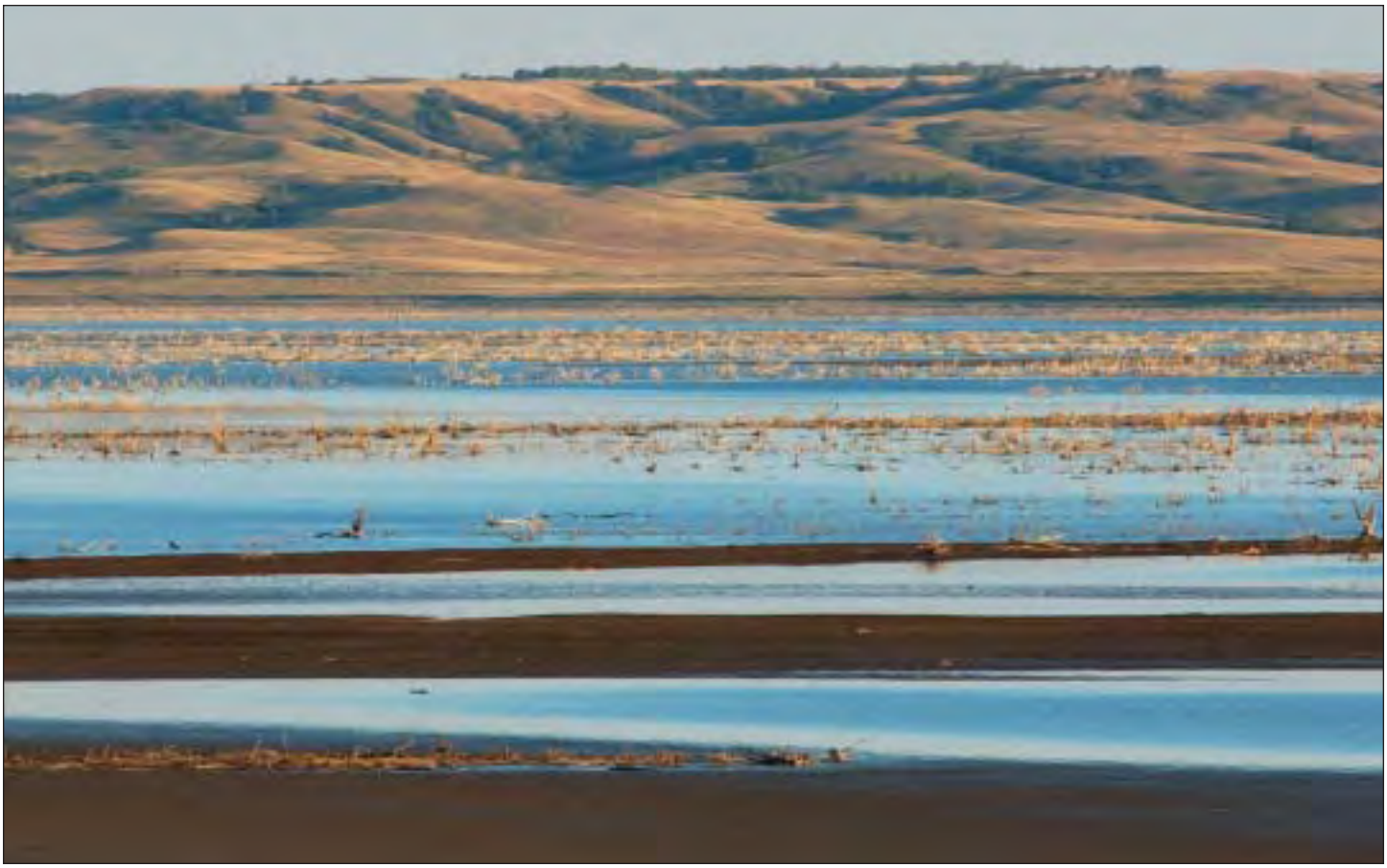
Typically, I don't say much about some of the fisheries other than Sakakawea and Devils Lake because there are simply too many to mention. So I generalize, as I'll do here again. We still have a number of good lakes across the state, but there are some areas being hit harder by drought than others. While some are still recovering from 2003-04 winterkill, there are others in good shape. Some waters are being worked on to enhance habitat for the future. Overall, fishing should be as good, maybe even a little better in some areas than 2004. These smaller systems have a tremendous capacity to rebound and some will likely do so this year.

While we're still in the Legislative session at the time of this writing, there are few pieces of fisheries related legislation you need to be concerned with. One in particular deals with aquatic nuisance species, which will allow us to do more to protect the precious aquatic resources we have, and give us an avenue for more funding through the federal government.

Once again I think we can look forward to some pretty good fishing this summer. The challenges are still many and far-reaching, but rest assured we're doing all we can to get back on track on Lake Sakakawea, maintain our quality fisheries, and improve on those that can be better.

TERRY STEINWAND is the Game and Fish Department's fisheries chief.

All that remained of Lake Oahe in North Dakota in 2004 was the Missouri River channel shown here near the North Dakota-South Dakota state line. The forecast doesn't leave much hope for Oahe's return to North Dakota in 2005.



CRAIG BIHRLE